

ALMOST A GENTLEMAN

Mark Benney

Henry Ernest Degras
" "



LONDON · PETER DAVIES

PO6001
D38A7
1966

Copyright © 1966 by Mark Benney
First published 1966

Printed in Great Britain by
Western Printing Services Ltd Bristol

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
I. The Paint Shop	1
II. The Cottage	28
III. The Breaks	55
IV. The Apprentice	87
V. The Waiting	114
VI. The Workman	139
VII. Other Wars	172
VIII. The Expert	186
IX. The Psephologist	214
X. The Expatriate	247
XI. The Professor	275
XII. I Only Am Escaped To Tell Thee	318

I Only am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee

Shimer College, in Mt Carroll, Illinois, has for its area a long and honourable history. It was founded in the 1850s, when Northern Illinois was still frontier territory. It had started as a genteel dream in the mind of a young Eastern lady who wished to bring to the daughters of the rude settlers around her some of the ladylike accomplishments with which she was herself amply endowed. She was Frances Wood when she began this missionary enterprise, but by the time she had built her first college building she was so heavily in debt to the local carpenter, Mr Shimer, that she found it easier to marry him than pay up. For nearly a century, as the Frances Shimer Seminary for Young Ladies, her establishment had taught the local girls the elements of flower-arrangement, water-colour sketching, bird-watching and piano accompaniment, and it had become a tradition for prosperous farmers in the area to marry a Shimer student. This good lady had been inactive for some years when she passed the institution over to the University of Chicago as, so to speak, a rural experimental station in which to try out ideas for the newly fashionable Junior College movement. For many years the university had provided its faculty, supervised its curriculum, administered its examinations, and it was normal for its students, if they wished to continue their education beyond the junior college level, to pass on to Chicago. Shimer College, now co-educational, had since become accredited as a full four-year college, able to give its own degrees, but the association with the University of Chicago continued at least in respect to the curriculum; it applied the same philosophy of general education in undergraduate studies, taught the same required courses and tested by the same system of com-

prehensive examinations. In that sense, then, our move from Chicago to rural Mt Carroll required of me only a minimum of intellectual adjustment.

In other ways, of course, the adjustment required was profound. It was a small place, with fewer than two hundred students, and it could not afford the generous work-loads I had become accustomed to. For nine years in Chicago I had taught the same course—admittedly a rich and complex course, encouraging continual revision and elaboration—and in my last years I had reached the point where to conduct a class or give a lecture required little in the way of preparation. At Shimer I found myself scheduled to give six different courses during the academic year, four of them with a pre-existing syllabus that had to be mastered in advance, two of them 'concentration' courses which I had to devise myself. It was taken for granted that I could teach the three required social science courses—the first on the ideological issues underlying American history, the second on the relations between cultures and personalities, the third on political philosophies. But as a 'writer' I was also adjudged capable of conducting courses on the relations between aesthetic theories and literary forms; as an Englishman, to give a course on Keynesian economic theory; as a friend of some modern mathematicians, to teach the famous course on formal logic, set theory and axiomatics known as 'Math One'. Moreover the teaching of such courses brought with them a full share of the tedious administrative chores imposed by the American educational system. In Chicago, there was a highly efficient examiner's office, staffed by experts in every field, that would take over most of the chores of preparing long lists of 'multiple-choice' questions. In Chicago, there was a diligent student adviser's office, that had its own sources of information about which students were attending classes, or staying up late, or desecrating graves. Here every faculty member had to prepare his own examinations, keep records of who attended his classes, and act as a counsellor to delinquent students. In Chicago, a six-hour class load, unless you were the type who enjoyed the processes of academic administration, involved only about ten hours work a

week: you had ample time for research, for reading, for giving guest lectures, for attending interesting seminars, for just plain boozing. But here, with a six-hour work load, you could scarcely get by with fewer than thirty hours' work a week.

And that was not the end of it. The students, in their rural isolation, were hard put to it to entertain themselves, and they invented extra-curricular activities at an alarming rate; they were earnestly intellectual, and their activities often required budgets and chairmen and Roberts' Rules of Order; they were eminently clubable, given to Theatre Clubs, Pre-Medical Clubs, Mathematical Clubs, Tichborne Clubs, and every club had to have a faculty adviser. The faculty was no less isolated, and no less endowed with the common urge for togetherness; it distinguished itself from the students by forming Groups rather than Clubs (and, of course, excluding students from membership)—play-reading groups, theology groups, mathematical groups, bird-watching groups, Wittgenstein groups. It was almost compulsory to supervise a couple of student Clubs (for me, theatre and politics), and to join a couple of faculty Groups (for me, play-reading and Wittgenstein). Such activities could add another ten hours to one's working week—and there one was, with a forty or forty-five hour week, earning less than a skilled plumber, and expected to maintain the graceful, cultivated, attentive posture of a community leader. I should make it plain that—other indications notwithstanding—I am not work-shy; I will happily curtail my sleep to over-prepare for an early-morning class on Book Ten of Plato's *Republic*; I glory in the keen wit, the multifarious experience, which allows me to coach a dull student in my maths course on the difference between cuts and nests before dinner, and after dinner direct an Ionescu play. But I must confess that, between such activities, I find it difficult to behave as though I were everyman's super-ego.

Let me elucidate this last remark. Shimer College is a small college set in a small rural town, population 2000. That it happens to be one of the most lovely areas of the continent does not matter; here, as elsewhere, the contours

of land are not subjects for painters but items in a realtor's evaluation. Mt Carroll is not the kind of town to suffer intellectuals gladly, or even Democrats; it lies in the very heart of Goldwater country, and such curiosities as it encourages are limited to the photograph albums of the better families. A preposterous pride of lineage (that is, of relationship to the handful of families who settled the town in the 1840s) determines the social life of the place, and although there is the normal complement of 'secret' societies and chapters, the most exclusive membership available to its citizens is, without question, that of the Mt Carroll Cemetery Association.

The cemetery dominates the town; if you stand at the top of its main street—which falls precipitously down to a rather charming but ill-kept little river—and look down past the Civil War memorial, the funeral home, the two monumental stone masons, it is to the leafy cemetery on the hill beyond that you must lift your eyes. Here the chief evidences of civic enterprise and virtue are concentrated. The driveways are freshly gravelled, the lawns immaculately trimmed, the lovely old trees sprayed and pruned with devotion, the graves planted with decorous blooms. But it is in their massive memorial columns that the townsfolk have most conspicuously displayed their pride of kinship. One may deduce the relative social standing of each family in the town, not only by the height of its central monument, but also by its distance from its neighbouring monuments: for the fashion is for the family's founders to be commemorated by an imposing centrepiece of polished marble, while succeeding generations are laid out in concentric circles around it. Study of these family plots also reveals another characteristic of the town—that, as the generations succeed each other, females come to outnumber males in every plot, for the sons go off to die in other corners of the world, while the daughters, often unwed, remain to tend the graves and wait their turn. Some of the larger plots in the older and more prestigious part of the cemetery have broad circumferences of sward surrounding them that will never be used, since no-one of that name remains.

Among the more imposing memorials of the Mt Carroll cemetery is a stately plinth of polished rose marble erected to the memory of Frances Ann Woods Shimer, founder of the college. It is a tall, unadorned, four-square tribute, like the woman herself, to one who for nearly half a century had in her safe-keeping the virtues of the Midwest's daughters. In the mind of the town she has provided an indelible model for all educators. She was a pillar of the Baptist Church, a Daughter of the American Revolution, unfalteringly high-minded but with a shrewd eye to the practical aspects of life, a purveyor of sound Republican principles, a lifelong abstainer from alcohol, a patron of local arts and a charter-member of the Cemetery Association. It was by this model that all subsequent educators attached to the college were judged. There had been a period, while the University of Chicago ran the school, when the townspeople were convinced that Belial was in their midst; they could not be convinced that underground passages did not exist between the men's and the women's dormitories, they saw with their own eyes female students riding male bicycles, they saw faculty-members drinking beer in the local taverns, and worse, when prohibition came, they heard from their own bootleggers of the enormous orders for hooch that the faculty were placing. This was a sad period for the town. The college was its major industry; faculty and students between them provided jobs for twenty or thirty locals and spent another two hundred thousand dollars a year with the local merchants; these basic economic facts alone made possible the obsessive ancestor-worship which dominated its collective life. The college had become a pipeline importing an inextricable mixture of money, alien people and ideas, and at first glance it seemed that, since the money was so desperately important, Mt Carroll would have to swallow the rest. But over the years the town became wise in the ways of colleges; they learned that every college president, no matter how cosmopolitan the institution he administers, nurtures the hope that his policies will prove themselves at the grass-roots by transforming the quality of life in his immediate environment; they learned too—particularly from the

daughters of prominent families who provided the secretarial staff of the college—that a college president spends so much of his time in fund-raising trips that he knows little of what is going on locally, and depends heavily on his secretary for information. In sum the town learned that it could not control the students, or the entire faculty that taught them, but those members of the faculty who were selected as permanent ('with tenure') residents of the community. It was a modest compromise with the forces of the outer world, but a highly effective one. It ensured that anyone who stayed in the establishment for more than five or six years was by that time an active member of the Community Club, Church groups and the Audubon Society, and, as members of the personnel committee, would carry the town's values into the most private recesses of college policy. Liberal as the college was, transcontinental as its ambitions were, distinguished as its academic record was to become, the basic facts were that its personnel policies were ultimately determined by a handful of middle-aged ladies, each of them politically employed because they represented the best cemetery lots in town.

I came into this set-up with inestimable advantages: the Kneales, the Christians, the Colehours, the Greeleys, were all pioneer families who boasted of English antecedents and as an Englishman—the first who had appeared in a decade or more—I was greatly in demand as, I suppose, a legitimizer, a final *cachet*. As a routine sociological job I had read what was in the local libraries about the history of the town; I had by accident rented what was probably the oldest 'mansion' in the vicinity and could invite people to come see my bit of the 'underground railroad'; I was early dubbed as an antiquarian, one who might become, with adequate coaching, an arbiter of local society. I was even luckier in that I was married to Soph—a Mediterranean beauty who unfalteringly played Beethoven sonatas without even looking at the music, who went to bed at ten p.m. no matter what conversations were transpiring, and who wore gowns at dinner parties that did not originate in the local stores. I have left Soph's greatest accomplishment to the last—from her Greek background she could enter fully into the local preoccupation

with ancestors; she kept in her head such a complicated kinship system that her polite questions were always relevant and even revealing; she was so artless, so lovely, that fierce old ladies had no difficulty in thinking of her as a daughter. In our first months in the area we were a winsome couple. We went to dinner-parties, people showed us their andirons, their pedigrees straight from the Royal College of Heralds, their recipes for venison pie. And Soph listened while their ten-year-old daughters scrambled through a Clementi sonatina and even promised to come in next day and talk with the kids about music.

I can't think of a faster way to destroy this *rapport* than the one I adopted. First, at a dinner party given by the Rinewalts, I ingeniously told the story of the original Rinewalt as I had traced it through the local newspapers. He had set up a corn distillery, and advertised his produce as good for lighting lamps; it was good for that, but it was also good for tempering the taste of local water; the town, then teetotal, tried to take away his State licence, and for three or four years there had been a local battle that gave Rinewalt time enough to transfer his capital from his distillery to his lumberyard. But the descendants of this tough, enterprising pioneer preferred to remember him as the man who donated the acre on which the town hall now stood, and put up the first thousand bucks to build the structure (although his timber bill for the town hall when completed came to five thousand bucks and that in pre-Civil War hard currency). The remaining Rinewalts had winnowed such facts out of their memories, and did not thank me for reviving them.

The next *faux-pas* was probably even more serious. The student Theatre Group had invited me to direct their first presentation of the season: after surveying their resources I decided against my pet project, a Freudian *Hamlet* in which Gertrude and Ophelia would be played by the same actress, and cast instead for two Ionescu one-act plays: *The Bald Soprano* and *Jack, or the Submission*. There was a charming, talented, monkey-faced little chick among the students who, it seemed to me, could carry the role of the Robertas with some distinction. Unfortunately one of the campus secre-

taries wandered into rehearsals at the moment when I was coaching this eighteen-year-old girl in the mysteries of her sex. In *Jack* there is a delightful scene in which the young protagonists grow big with the shared language of their loins, and Roberta offers the timeless solace of her sex: 'Come on . . . don't be afraid . . . I'm moist . . . My necklace is made of mud, my breasts are dissolving, my pelvis is wet, I've got water in my crevices . . .' The two students, both of an age to be scared by their very responsiveness to their lines, worked over the scene for a full hour, while I tried to loosen their inhibitions with all the urgency I could command. 'Now come on, girl—forget that you're a respectable young middle-class miss with a respectable interest in the liberal arts! Now you're just a great gaping *womb*, and you want him to fill it. Don't just speak your lines—sing them, *secrete* them! And you, Jack—you've got to smell what she's saying as well as hear it. She's giving back to you what we all lost when we first stood up on our hind legs—the exciting life of the nose!' No doubt, in my eagerness to get a good performance, my exhortations took on a wild and bawdy flavour not common in the speech of Midwest professors to their charges; certain it is that the secretary making notes in the background went away with the impression that I intended not so much to produce a modern play as conduct a public orgy. In the staff coffee room there was much excited discussion, and it was decided that, although Ionescu might be a fitting experience for college students, the townspeople themselves should be sheltered from him. For the first time in many years the students put on a theatrical performance which was not publicly advertised and to which the town was not invited. Dark rumours circulated about my lecherous turn of mind.

And as if that wasn't enough, I had to offend further. At Parents' Week-end it was customary for the school to put on a series of exercises—poetry-readings, choral recitals, debates, etc.—designed to convince the visitors that their offspring spent their time in impeccably intellectual pursuits. This year the subject of Medicare had received its quadrennial airing in the presidential campaign, and the student Pre-

Med Club decided to sponsor a debate under the rubric of Socialized Medicine. It goes without saying that I, as a member of the British Labour Party, was invited to argue the affirmative position; it seemed equally appropriate that Joe Mullin, the President of the college, should argue from the viewpoint of the AMA. We had a good audience, with many doctors in it; the debate was spirited; and the students and their families, taking sides vociferously, enjoyed the affair hugely. But for the good townspeople who were present it was a bewildering, an almost sacrilegious experience. That an obscure member of the faculty should argue in public with his President, in advocacy of measures that smelled rankly of Moscow—this was indeed shocking—teachers had been sacked from the local High School for offences not one hundredth part as rank!

So, starting from inestimable advantages, I had contrived within a few months to earn myself a local reputation as an irreverent iconoclast, a lecher and a socialist. It was in the nature of things that such a monster should also turn out to be a drunkard.

Indeed Poffy's Tavern on Market Street did provide me with something of a haven. It is an old, restful bar, and its patrons were often old and restful. It is also a kindly bar—by the front window is a row of antique cane chairs, where old age pensioners may come and read the daily papers or doze. The talk there tends to be placid, about corn-yields or starter-feeds or calf prices, for many of the customers farm sixty or a hundred acres in addition to holding a job, and they come to the tavern as much to hire each other's labour and equipment as to drink. Two or three times a year, when the government cheques for soil-bank or price-support payments come in, there is much gambling in the further corners of the bar; 'bar-poker' is the favourite game, in which the serial numbers on dollar bills provide the basis of a combination bluffing-and-guessing game in which you stake the bill you play with; during the course of an evening, with five or six players, a man might lose as much as fifty dollars at this game and feel himself a hell of a fellow. Except on a Saturday night, when farm-families come into town to do their week-

end shopping, you seldom see a woman in Poffy's, for it makes few concessions to the women whose notion of a night out is to sit hemmed round a vinyl-topped table drinking whisky sours. The juke box carries husky Louis Armstrong records and barber-shop quartets; the vending machines in the lavatories dispense serviceable rubber items; there are jars of pickled pigs-feet on display beside the whisky bottles. No self-respecting Mt Carroll matron would set foot in such a place; it was thus the one certain refuge in town from the censorious encroachments of such. Many were the times when, after some exasperating committee meeting or some deadly social occasion, I slipped away as soon as possible and made a beeline for the genial shelter of Poffy's. In fact, I suppose, scarcely a day passed without our conspicuous little white Volvo being observed parked outside the tavern for an hour or two. On a few occasions, I must confess, when the good conversation and merry atmosphere detained me longer than usual, I had even been known to jitterbug with one of the co-eds who were in the habit of dropping in for a beer, late at night after the farmers had gone home.

As the criticism mounted against me on all sides it became clear to me that I would never be accepted into the bosom of this town. But I was, I must confess, intrigued when I was joined one evening at Poffy's bar by one of the town's most respected professional gentlemen. It was not rare for respected professional gentlemen to come into the bar—Walter, the convivial host, carried some tolerable wines on his shelves; but it was rare for them to linger beyond the bare purchase of a bottle or two. He began, this gentleman, with a commendatory word or two about the summer theatre that I and the local Anglican priest were busy trying to organize. He inquired if my involvement in such a spectacular and long-term project might be regarded as an indication that I intended to stay in the community? He wondered if the fact that I had recently bought an old schoolhouse—at such a ridiculously low price that it might otherwise be regarded as a simple investment—could be further evidence of my desire to settle in the area? No family, he assured me,

could feel that they had a real stake in the community until they owned their own acre or two of ground (and I had just passed that hurdle) and their own cemetery plot. The really choice sites in the cemetery were of course all bespoken: that is to say, the ordinary ground-level sites. But Mr Zink and his wife, who had recently taken off with their boat for a fishing-trip on Lake Michigan, had not been heard of for eight days, and it seemed highly unlikely that their bodies would ever be recovered. The Zinks had a pre-need contract for two adjacent crypts in the Mt Carroll mausoleum, and their heirs, unlikely now to have use for them, would be willing to re-assign the contract at a bargain rate.

It was on an early summer evening that this intelligence came to me, and it fitted so neatly with my prior estimate of the sociometrics of the Mt Carroll community, and my recently whetted appetite for real estate bargains, that I went out with the gentleman to the pavement outside the tavern and stared up at the mausoleum. There it was, the first thing that met one's eyes as one lifted them to the hills beyond the town: a simple classic structure of white marble, ultimate home of four hundred bodies that in their day had had foresight enough to elevate themselves above the line of cypress trees, above even the ground-level of granite and pink marble memorials, to a point where no casual eye casting down Market Street could fail to note their abode. That evening I undertook to discuss the matter with my wife.

It had been a strange spring that year; after a severe winter the thaw came late and after a week or two of near-summer temperatures hard weather set in again; it was the middle of May before the local farmers could start their ploughing. But suddenly, by the beginning of June, temperatures were in the nineties. Such sharp alternations of hot and cold subject even the most solid structures to severe internal stresses. The mausoleum, it turned out, was not one of the most solid of structures. One morning the sexton in charge of the cemetery was on his rounds when he noticed a foot, or rather a bone wearing a high-buttoned boot, protruding through an expanse of marble wall at a height of about nine feet above ground. Both above and below the protrusive boot was a

large crack in the wall that suggested other, less sightly extrusions might appear any moment. The sexton was a man of propriety; he went and got himself a step-ladder from a nearby toolshed, removed the boot for evidence, and pushed the bones back into their original housing. Then he went and reported the incident to his employers, the Cemetery Association.

It should be made clear at once that the Cemetery Association had no responsibility for this building; it had simply, many years ago, sold a tract of hallowed ground to a private, non-profit corporation formed to erect such an edifice and apportion its space and costs among interested families. It was, of course, concerned that feet should be sticking out of a mausoleum wall and disturbing the placid atmosphere of its domain; it was also concerned that, as the summer wore on, odours of putrefying bodies escaping through the cracks might be wafted by the uncertain breezes into the nostrils of good people visiting their more securely housed relatives. But the fault really lay with those malcontent families in 1910, who, because they had felt that the older families were usurping all the best plots in the cemetery, had listened to a plausible young salesman from Chicago and built for themselves this pretentious and gimcrack piece of masonry. The salesman had come, canvassed the deep envies and resentments of the townsfolk for one another, showed his subscribers impressive sketches, placed their order with his firm, and then gone on to repeat the process in other small country towns. Now, fifty years later, the thin marble veneer was falling away from the cheap concrete blocks behind them, great cracks were appearing in the structure, and no-one knew that it would not all suddenly disintegrate, emitting a cascade of corruption.

Some days after the matter was brought to the attention of the Cemetery Association, a State Inspector of Cemeteries appeared in town. His was one of the minor patronage posts available to the Republican governor of the time, and he had no wish to impose radical solutions on such a right-thinking community. He did bring the depressing news, however, that many such mausoleums throughout the State

—perhaps inspired by the same fast-talking young salesman —had lately been falling apart; the thing to do, he thought, was to re-inter the bodies elsewhere in the cemetery and pull the whole thing down. The inspector left the town as quietly as he came, giving no embarrassing directions, making only a few discreet recommendations. There was some buzz of talk about his visit and views around the local dinner tables, and one family at least, well-known for its partiality for a good funeral, determined to follow his advice and relocate its dead under a modest mantle of turf. Unfortunately the family chose to make a social occasion out of what should have been a strictly professional transaction. Some susceptible ladies fainted when they witnessed, at the opening of the first crypt, a supposedly eternal solid bronze casket fall apart into an unsightly shambles of rotted wood and bones. The sense of outrage was now directed against, not only the fly-by-night salesman in the distant past, but the local undertaking establishments whose wares proved no less gimcrack than the mausoleum itself and opened up a nightmare of decay within decay. But in the classic pattern of social psychosis outrage and guilt went hand-in-hand, discussion of the communal aspects of the problem was limited to mutterings behind closed doors, the local newspaper was silent on the subject. As for the respected professional gentleman who first aroused my interest in the mausoleum, I heard nothing further from him, and when I tried to stop him one day on the steps of the bank, he hurried away with an agitated air.

I observed these growing cracks in the respectable façade of the town with some amusement and much sympathy, for the image of a sepulchre cracking open to reveal the horrors within came very close to home. Mark Benney, the distinguished educator, the fluent lecturer, the director of sophisticated research projects, the writer of urbane reports—what indeed was he if not a thin, pretentious mausoleum in which the egregious juices of the old Harry were decomposing into an irruption of noxious gases? If I was to despise Mt Carroll for its absurd airs, must I not also despise myself? If Mt Carroll had an awkward job of re-interment to face, did not

I also? Somehow the fate of the mausoleum made me feel more at ease with the town than I could possibly have done had it remained sound and I had only acquired the reversion of a brace of crypts.

But the town and I were not the only crumbling sepulchres in the picture: there was also Shimer College itself. The fate of the small liberal arts college in America is a hard one unless by chance it acquires heavy endowments or an adventitious reputation. To attract a good faculty it must compete with the great state and private universities; to attract a good student body it must offer excellent and individualized teaching, to say nothing of good equipment. Shimer, with its heritage of old buildings and genteel traditions, had little in the way of equipment to offer: its library was lamentably thin, its laboratory facilities were inferior to those of a good urban grammar school, and even such elementary devices as a tape-recorder or film-projector were in short supply. All Shimer had to sell was an idea—an almost medieval idea of a kind of all-round education that would prepare young minds to be creative and supply reflexive in their personal lives, rational and responsible in the public sphere, and intellectually sure-footed in their professional avocations. The lineaments of such an education had been brilliantly painted by Robert Maynard Hutchins and his brilliant staff in the '40s, and it is still my considered opinion that the best educated group of people in the world today are those five or six thousand students who graduated from the College of the University of Chicago between the years 1948 and 1955. But in day-to-day practice the idea was implemented by what was probably the most intelligent and devoted group of educators ever brought together under a single roof—men like Eugene Northrup, Milton Singer, Christian Mackauer, David Riesman, William McNeill, Joseph Schwab, Donald Meiklejohn, Reuel Denney. It takes a rich and powerful university to put together such a staff; and even such talented men could not consistently engage their students in all the richness of the curriculum they had devised.

But Shimer was trying to implement the same programme with a staff that was, however devoted, inadequate to the task.

The core of the faculty, some five or six people, had indeed either taught or been educated at Chicago, and to these fell the chief burdens of lecturing, keeping course-readings up to date, devising examinations. Another dozen members of the faculty were intelligent young refugees from large state universities, victims of the 'publish or perish' policies of such places or of some political purge; they were invariably grateful to the college for arresting their professional decline, and they invariably brought with them a grim determination that their professional standards would remain high no matter what their status—a disastrous attitude to bring to courses designed to explore received truths rather than impart them. And augmenting these was a nondescript penumbra of local 'moonlighters'—Baptist ministers, local business managers, choir-masters, lawyers—brought in to teach a course or two as enrolment required. It was an integral part of the Chicago curriculum that courses should be taught in small discussion-groups, about the size of a good Boston dinner party. By counting in the President, who once in a while gave a course in Chemistry, and his secretary, who once in a while gave a course in Typing, it was possible to assert that the student-faculty ratio at Shimer was 14-1; but of course the real ratio was nearer to 25-1, and it was sadly true that, of the six or seven courses an individual student would take during an academic year, only two or three of them would be taught by competent instructors.

It had been one of my early and most encouraging discoveries in Chicago that I was, for good or bad, roughly the kind of person a College student should be after his parents had spent nine thousand dollars for a Bachelor of Arts degree—to wit, able to engage himself, intelligently if vicariously, in the public and private problems of other people. After thirty years of international living and reading I had acquired most of the intellectual skills Hutchins had hoped to impart to his students in a four-year programme: I was, so to speak, a good Chicago graduate at least in the upper percentiles. It was startling to find, therefore, that the faculty at Shimer, confronted with the kind of mind the programme was expressly devised to shape, should be baffled and awed by it—

indeed in some cases frankly hostile to it. But when one decent Chicago-style student could find himself regarded by experts in half-a-dozen distinct fields as a colleague, he was bound to wonder how thinly the white marble veneer could be spread over the mausoleum of Western culture.

The Shimer students were, in fact, less depressing than the Shimer faculty. The most interesting of them, for better or worse, were likely to be from academic families who wanted to get their offspring away from the dangers and distractions of a big city. The college, because of its tranquil surroundings and progressive programme, could rely on a dozen such every year; they were likely to have some verbal facility, a wider acquaintance with books than other students, and to shine in discussion groups though not necessarily in examinations. A much larger group of students came from professional families in the larger Midwest towns—students whose high schools had been unable to prepare them adequately for entrance into the University of Chicago, and who were led to believe that they could get the same 'progressive' education with more lenient entrance requirements. Such students came with an extraordinary hunger for culture, nurtured in revolt against the crass values of their high schools—these were the boys who had not made the basketball team, and read poetry instead, the girls who were not well-formed enough to become cheer-leaders and drum-majorettes, and in compensation developed an interest in archaeology; their interests, their unorthodoxy, created a steady hum of intellectuality in the dining room and dorms. But conspicuous in the student body was a group of somewhat older, and often wealthier, students who had already had a semester or two in other, better-known colleges, and had failed on either social or intellectual grounds to retain their places. Many of these were from 'broken homes', and their previous college failures could be attributed to 'emotional disturbance'; a few of them were from scandalously wealthy families where the children had always been objects of conspicuous consumption and had never been asked to produce. But various as their backgrounds were, they all had in common the radiant attribute of being young.

Absurd though it might be to try to persuade a high-bosomed girl named Shirley Sharr, the height of whose ambition was to have as many husbands as her mother, to fall in love with three bearded, long-dead gentlemen named Plato, Karl Marx, and Henry James, the total enterprise was stimulating. But the community such a heterogeneous group of students made for themselves out of the pitiful facilities of the college and the town was always interesting and as richly deserving of study as any discovered by Margaret Mead on the Sepik River in New Guinea. Unlike Chicago, I could here get to know well at least one in four of the students I taught; I could sit with them at lunch in the dining room, have coffee with them in the New Lounge, rehearse with them in plays, sit on committees with them, meet them over popcorn and coke in the local movie-house, drink with them in Poffy's, drop in for a beer when they elected to picnic somewhere on my five-hundred soil-banked acres of picturesque hills. As a teacher, I had not much to give any of them; a certain sense of security to those who were obviously not going to get their degree—for after all, I had none; a certain strength to those whose parents were pressuring them to elect a career before they felt a call—for after all, I had had four or five different careers, and all of them interesting; a certain social confidence to those whose parents disapproved of their bizarre obsessions—for after all, I was notorious for making dinner parties entertaining by virtue of my own far-out associations. Because of the smallness of the school and the strange standards of admission, I could never quite lose the sense that I was a member of the staff of a middle-class Borstal Institution; and many obscure impulses from the past influenced my relations with the students. I assumed of all of my charges that they were going to end up in jail; it was important for me that they should know, once they got there, how to make the best of it—they should understand the social structure of a jail (or of a corporation), and they should have interests, resources, that would steel them against the more self-destructive influences to which the jail-bird or the corporation-man is subjected. I was probably the only man in America (apart from Robert Maynard Hutchins)

who knew that the task of higher education is not to train a chap for a career so much as provide him with resources to withstand its total demands.

The Chicago curriculum had begun as a magnificent attempt to realize Hesse's *Glasperlenspiel* here on earth; at Shimer, I'm afraid, it became a spiel. And yet, under the cover of whatever rhetoric the admissions office spokesmen were using in their visits to Illinois high schools, I began to feel, as I met the students they netted, that I was glad the mausoleum was crumbling, that I was glad the pretensions of advanced education were wearing so thin. Something of what modern psychiatrists call 'transference to the institution' was taking place; I really believed that, although for the wrong reasons, Shimer was providing me with the right students. Statistics demonstrated that most kids who emerged with B averages from the academic grind would secure good \$15,000 a year jobs with one of the four hundred largest corporations in America. I had once tried to follow my own career through the very reliable statistical tables of the British Home Office, and there was no question that, by the age of fifty-two, I was rotting in Parkhurst Preventive Detention Prison, waiting for the heart attack or neural seizure that would at last take me off the national budget. I think it was William James, that magnificently neurotic character, who uttered the magnificently pragmatic phrase, 'My first act of free will will be to believe in the doctrine of free will'. At Shimer my whole mission in life was to persuade my students that, even though the statistics said they would end their lives as Vice-President-in-charge of Fig Newtons for the Nabisco corporations, there is always, in any statistical table, a residue of non-conformists, and that they might have more fun elsewhere. For a while it seemed to me, and even, I think, to many of my students, that this message was an important one. But this—if message it was—emerged only in a nuance, at best a comment, in the classroom, between chunks of exposition about the shifts in Plato's thought between the *Republic* and the *Laws*, or in the differences between the social structures underlying Cartesian geometry and contemporary vector analysis.

But outside the classroom the Shimer students were forging their own defences, and in a more appropriate idiom than I could command. They had guitars, and sang folk-songs to each other. They went to Mexico over the vacations, and came back with bundles of peyote and marihuana. They did Zen exercises, and circulated tattered copies of Artaud and Reich and Burroughs; and above all they made out with each other. Off campus, of course, this last was easy enough; on campus, the opportunities for privacy were so few that no copulation really counted unless it took place within the staff's normal area of vigilance. PDA (Public Display of Affection) was the most chronic of problems in the college; and the student strategy in this perpetually running battle was to obliterate the lines between decency and indecency to the point where busy members of the faculty would not notice what was going on under their eyes. Luscious blondes would come to class in clothes that did little more than cover their genitals and their breasts; when one went up to one's office after lunch, it was by a path threaded between entwined couples littering the stairs; in the winter evenings, if one had been foolhardy enough to park one's car in a dark corner of the parking-lot, one would find the doors locked and a strange, bulky outline on the back seat. Two or three times a year, at the monthly faculty meetings, the dean of students would make an anguished outcry. Resolutions would be debated: all cars in the parking-lots must be locked during the owner's absence; students must not sit on steps with their arms around each other. The only one of twenty-seven faculty meetings I remember in any detail is the one in which we all debated a rule about whether female students should be allowed to wear 'short' shorts to classes and lectures; the older men (excluding me) were against it, the younger men were for it; at the insistence of the dining-hall manager, we all agreed that short shorts should not be worn in the dining-hall.

Sometimes the excitations of sex were augmented by the excitations of alcohol (strictly forbidden on campus), and then the headaches of the administration were compounded. Since the female of the species had to be in her dormitory

before midnight, while the male had no curfew hours, the occasions for partying in a normal straightforward sense were few, but the system did lend itself to ingeniously furtive assignations. The classic expedients of rope ladders and rooftop rendezvous were not unknown; students with a turn for lock-picking were always in demand; and certainly more girls informed the dean that they were going home for the week-end than ever got there. It was a pity that healthy human animals, at the very crest of their reproductive powers, should have to engage their intelligences in such bizarre solutions to the problems of pairing—it certainly reduced the amount of intellectual energy they could bring to the mastery of the courses offered. Once in a while, a promising student who was discovered doing something outrageous, like concealing himself in the basement of the women's dorm overnight, catching a dose of syphilis in Rockford and passing it on to a couple of the co-eds before it became manifest, would be sent down. But the college could not afford to lose too many students, particularly good ones, and more lenient punishments were the rule. In all such matters, a delicate balance had to be struck between the needs of the students, who could flatly refuse to return next year if the régime was too oppressive (already too many of them were taking that course), and of the parents, who were usually spending three thousand dollars a year to keep their child in a more morally salutary environment than they themselves could provide.

American parents are a problem throughout the country's system of higher education; in a small college they lour as a black cloud behind all that passes between student and teacher. Shimer, because of its rural location and 'progressive' curriculum, tended to attract parents who suspected the worst of their children, and wanted to banish them for the last few years of their dependency to a safe custodial distance; and Shimer, because of its precarious financial situation, could not afford to reject so menial a function. It was a strange, and almost sinister, aspect of the place that immediate and vivid though the students were, one became almost more compellingly aware of their parents than of them.

Here is Alicia, a dark, withdrawn little woman of seventeen; she hands in themes that have a desperate, haunted quality whatever the subject and she is having an affair with the most systematic beatnik on campus. She strikes you as an original, she should be reading Sappho, Margaret Murray, Emily Brontë, Simone de Beauvoir; but you know also, with an uncertain sense of menace, that her father is an Episcopalian priest, ruddy-cheeked, given to golf, in line for a bishopric, who is paying you to stamp out any unhealthy tendencies in his children. Or here is Larry with a keen analytic mind and enormous energy, a bridge-builder or swamp-clearer if ever you saw one; unfortunately (since he is aesthetically purblind) he wants to run the technical end of the campus theatre—designing scenes, rigging lightboards, running the sound system. You ache to turn his talents to areas where they could be creative rather than disruptive; but his mother (he has no father) is a successful bit-player on network television who made her start with the Provincetown Players, and hopes desperately that her son will become a Lee Strasberg, an Orson Welles. Because they were so important to the administration (they paid the bills, they could transfer their children to other colleges), these parents collectively became a coven of malevolent spirits. Those one met individually, perhaps once or twice a year, were usually intelligent and interesting people, even when they were unduly pessimistic about their offspring; but as, over the months, reports reached the faculty of parental reactions to this and that, they inevitably became a faceless force of repression. Mrs A had visited the campus unexpectedly and seen a couple of students necking in disgusting fashion on the library steps. Mr B, who strongly disapproved of smoking, had observed an instructor offering a cigarette to one of his charges. Mr C, welcoming his son home for the Christmas vacation, was disturbed to find the boy with his nose in a big thick book entitled *Suicide*, an assigned reading. The Rev. D was astounded to hear that the students' Politics Club had been allowed to invite a well-known Communist to address the campus. Taken separately, of course, such complaints received little attention, but their cumulative effect was to

give any teacher of imagination an uncomfortable sense that the dull, jaundiced eye of middle-aged middle-class America was staring down the back of his neck.

The chief authority on parental reactions—and indeed himself a rather portly, deliberate, dignified embodiment of Parenthood—was the President, Dr Joe Mullin. It was to him, personally, that most complaints were directed, and he had a way, when the day's mail was black, of slightly hunching his broad shoulders as though the load on them was heavier than usual, and of seeming to count ten before responding to a casual greeting. It was an onerous task he had taken upon himself—to ensure the survival, and even the prosperity, of a small rural Midwest college with a 'progressive' style; and it no doubt irked him that his students, and even some of his faculty, were disinclined to make the same sacrifices on behalf of this cause as he himself had made. Joe had once been a hearty drinker and smoker; he had lately, to improve his public image, reduced both to a sociably token intake. In the Midwest educational scheme, he was convinced, high thinking would be tolerated only if it went hand-in-hand with plain living, and it was a source of constant pain for him that, among today's youth, those most given to elevated intellectual pursuits were also given to a kind of fancy living apt to annoy the local Police Chief. He felt fully, almost tearfully, *in loco parentis*. The circumstances of the school and its financial resources required that he should accept an unduly high proportion of students who, had their parents been less well-heeled, would probably be serving time at a penal farm, and he hoped devoutly for the day when the reputation of Shimer would be such that he could both fill his dormitories and reject all applicants who did not have a straight A record in high school. Such reputations, he knew, do not come about by chance; a college must have a good Public Relations outfit to achieve it. But even the most expert of public relations men must have something to work with; the school should have a glistening marble façade, any cracks in it should be concealed, and any awkward extrusions of skeletons should be hastily pushed back out of sight.

From my diary:

December 28, 1962. Today, while I was in the Bank, smugly depositing a pay-cheque drawn three days early to meet cheques I had drawn last week, Joe Mullin greeted me warmly and asked if I was free to talk with him. It was about 10.30 a.m. on a bright frosty morning. I told him I had an errand to do in a neighbouring town, but would be back by midday. When Joe wants to speak to a lowly member of his faculty, it is usually to chide him for something, and as I drove to and from my errand I wondered—had the Politics Club (I am its faculty sponsor again this year) invited the wrong speaker? Had one of my creditors sent him a nasty letter? Had I said something at the Dean's pre-Christmas party that I shouldn't?

Promptly at midday I was waiting for him outside his office. I'd picked up the *Economist* from my mailbox, and there was an amusing article about left-handed people (I am one myself) as the last severely oppressed minority group; I had time to read it through before I heard him come creaking evenly along the corridor from the West—first a succession of judicious, even-tempered footsteps and then suddenly a large swaddled bundle of winterized man. I had time to recall my childhood in Mayford Approved School, waiting for Mr Horne, cane in hand, to come along a corridor like a fate—time, too, to admire momentarily this man's patient devotion to duty (I'm sure it was past his lunch hour). He apologized briefly for being late, removed his coat in the outer office, and then ceremoniously waved me into his room and a chair. He began the talk by asking was I warm enough in the new house? But of course I was—I had two oil furnaces to heat it; of course I did not yet know how much fuel they would consume, but so far it had been a mild winter. He too had lately . . .

Followed what is, I suppose, the verbal equivalent of the anaesthetist's needle. An elaborate description of the heating arrangement of the President's House on campus, past and present. Originally it had been heated by the main college steam plant—last on the line; they received

their heat too late, and were cut off too early; he had been forced to open windows, close them, sit in the glass porch which was warmer than the rest of the house, apologize to guests, install electric heaters in the bedrooms. I must have shown by my expression that I was adequately anaesthetized. He began to talk about the last faculty meeting, when we had agreed to accept a revision of the student-faculty ratio from 9-1 to 14-1, on the premise that this would allow for salary increases and sabbaticals at full pay. He pointed out that the figures showed that, on projected enrolment, we had three-and-a-half faculty members too many; and there were only three contracts up for renewal this year. He was sorry that the decision had to be made now. My first year, he had been somewhat disappointed in me—I'd been seen too often in Poffy's, and the registrar complained that I turned my grades in late; but this year, well, apart from that unfortunate question in the Math One exam about bearded students who lie and clean-shaven faculty who tell the truth, I'd done pretty well. He had gathered, when I first accepted this appointment, that I'd really been thinking of retiring from teaching and taking up acting. And certainly my performances at the new Summer Theatre showed that I had a future in that field. I would understand, of course, that he personally would have been happier if it had been three other people's contract up next year. But it wasn't. It was Benney's, and McKinney's, and Adam's. I had known what was coming, of course, at least ten minutes before he got to the words. 'Your contract will not be renewed'; and the extraordinary thing was that from then on I focussed my attention almost entirely on the problem of facial management. There were things that Joe said, not merely about me, but about several colleagues, that produced feelings of hilarity, anger, dismay, resentment, incredulous wonder; but my whole effort was to maintain a steely, detached and indifferent mask.

In the year 1944-5, the American birth-rate had suffered a very sharp decline; young men who had not worried about

ALMOST A GENTLEMAN

contraceptives while their lives were in danger began using them in great quantities when they returned to civilian life. Eighteen years later, in consequence, the number of high school graduates looking for a college also dropped sharply. In some respects this was fortunate; throughout the country, college facilities were already strained—and this relative drop in enrolment gave many an institution a year's grace during which to build new facilities. There is one other respect in which it was fortunate. I got fired.

The statistical tables say that, at age 54, without a job, I stand little chance of ever paying off the mortgage on my house. Shit. I know those statistical tables. I always end up in the bottom right-hand cell, unaccountable.